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ABSTRACT

Workplace education curriculum models may be based on the functional context, ethnographic/student-centered, or participatory approach. Curricula based on the functional context approach focus on the abilities (functions) needed by workers at a specific worksite, and workers are unlikely to have much input in deciding what or how they will study. The ethnographic (student-centered) model rejects the use of prescriptive, predetermined, skills-based goals to shape the curriculum; instead, it draws upon workers' thoughts and voices as a starting point for all other learning. The participatory approach is similar to the functional context approach in that it focuses on student/worker experience and thought, and it is similar to the student-centered approach in terms of negotiating course content with students and focusing on their own purposes for learning. Unlike the contextual and ethnographic approaches, the participatory approach prompts students to examine the meaning of their collective experiences as a whole, asks students to question assumptions about work and the world, and involves students in setting course goals and themes and in creating materials and evaluating progress. Each approach reflects a different educational framework that in turn shapes teachers', students', and funders' roles, as well as course content and the learning process. (MN)

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The Commonwealth of Massachusetts

Department of Education

Curriculum Models for Workplace Education

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bert V. Antonucci
Commissioner

October, 1993

I am pleased to present this publication developed through our Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative. This publication is part of a series of resources developed for and by workplace education practitioners in business, education, and labor partnerships funded through our Department's Workplace Literacy Program.

These resources are the result of our commitment to strengthening the capacity, knowledge base, and quality of the field and to provide much-needed and long-awaited information on highly-innovative and replicable practices. These resources also complement the curriculum framework of staff training and development initiatives that were successfully developed and piloted in conjunction with the field during the past fiscal year and represent an oustanding example of the Department's theme: " Working Together for Better Results."

Each of these publications was written by trainers and workshop presenters who have participated in the training of new workplace education staff. All publications provide invaluable information on important aspects of workplace education programming. All documents begin with an overview of the field or current-state-of-the-art section as it relates to the topic at hand. Then, they move into the practitioner's experience. Next, the training plan of presenters is discussed. Each publication ends with a list of resources.

We are confident that with this series of publications we have begun an exciting but challenging journey that will further support workplaces in their progression towards becoming high-performance work organizations.

Sincerely,

Robert V. Antonucci

Robert V. Antonucci
Commissioner of Education

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Curriculum Models in Workplace Education

by Andrea Nash

A curriculum is a plan for reaching educational goals. Some of these goals are explicit, and others are implicitly embedded in the underlying messages that are manifest in the ways that the curriculum defines its purpose, frames problems and suggests potential solutions. It is central to effective program and curriculum development that planners (and teachers, in particular) think carefully about the assumptions that underlie their approach to workplace education so that their curriculum development process can be the result of coherent and conscious pedagogical choices. Without this, a curriculum can convey unintended messages to students, or can become a series of disjointed lessons with no clear focus or set of guiding principles.

There are several models of curriculum development currently being used in workplace education, each one evolving as teachers, employers, funders, and workers gain experience in such programs. While they all share the common context of "workplace," their varied purposes make them often seem more distinct than they are alike. Each model would offer its own answer to these questions, among others: What is workplace education? What are the goals of workplace education classes? How are those goals determined, when and by whom? How is the course curriculum created, implemented, and evaluated? And, probably the most pressing issue for teachers, how does the curriculum accommodate the often conflicting needs of workers and employers? The following sections will look at these questions from the perspectives of three common approaches to workplace curriculum development.

The Functional Context Approach

The functional context approach builds upon developments in the field of adult education - developments which point to the need for course content to be context-specific and relevant. Rather than a skills-based approach,which organizes its curriculum around academic skills (reading,

writing, math, etc.) without relating them to real-life tasks and purposes, the functional context approach bases the curriculum on the abilities (functions) that students need within a specific context. In workplace education, the "context" is each particular worksite. Each one requires worker familiarity with its own, unique set of skills, relationships, and behaviors. Broadly defined, this approach shares with other contemporary approaches a focus on relevant, meaningful, lessons that ground learning in the familiar context of daily life.

A narrower, but more common interpretation of the functional context approach stresses the learning of specific job skills, specific kinds of job-related reading and writing, appropriate ways to interact and communicate, and problem-solving skills that can be immediately applied to practical tasks. Jorie Philippi defines the functional context approach as "The use of actual job materials and simulations to teach the applications of basic oral, reading, writing, computational, and reasoning skills to enable individuals to use printed and written information to perform specific job tasks competently."

Much like training models, the goal of such a curriculum is for workers to improve their job performance by mastering the body of knowledge that managerial and educational experts have determined to be necessary for worker and corporate growth. The curriculum development process begins with a workplace needs assessment, or "audit," of the literacy and work skills required by each job. Specialists use this information to design a curriculum that gives workers practice in those areas. A typical syllabus includes units on how to: follow health and safety rules, report problems, follow company procedures, read and fill out work documents, participate in meetings, etc. The emphasis is on behavioral change, which is often determined by competency-based tests or evaluations of performance - can workers <u>do</u> something better as a result of having attended class.

In most programs using this model, workers are unlikely to have much of a role in deciding what they will study or how. The course content is well-planned before the class meets and leaves little room for dealing with workplace concerns that students bring with them. (Many teachers report feeling a lot of stress at having to choose between following the curriculum and responding to student needs.) However, with the growth of planning and evaluation teams, more and more workers are becoming involved in the shaping of course content, within certain constraints. Since the functional

context model approaches increased productivity as a matter of skills development, many workplace issues that affect the quality of worklife (how the work is organized, wages, autonomy, etc.) that workers might like to include in workplace education, are considered outside the scope of what needs to be addressed in the classroom. This is one way that "conflicting agendas" are avoided. The shared goal of being part of (if you are a worker) or employing (if you are an employer) a more highly-skilled workforce is seen as the unifying factor that supercedes labor-management differences.

The Ethnographic/Student-Centered Approach

The ethnographic approach comes from the field of anthropology and refers to a process of thoroughly investigating a community of people in order to better understand their beliefs, their ways, their strengths, and their needs (as they define them). In workplace education, the intention has been to use ethnographic methods to deepen our understanding of how workers view their own work and their own goals. How would they describe their work experience? The workplace? What do they already know and what do they want to know? These are the kinds of questions that begin the student-teacher dialogue about how the class can best suit the aims of its participants. From this flexibility emerges a student-centered curriculum that integrates both student and teacher priorities. Skills practice grows out of questions and difficulties that arise as workers use spoken and written language to communicate their ideas. The teacher may use specific techniques - language experience approach stories, oral history, focused discussion, etc. - as the starting point for language and literacy practice. Students may rehearse workplace interactions that they have identified as problematic, may read and write about their work experiences and concerns, or brainstorm and share strategies for dealing with particular workplace problems. Using an approach that builds on strengths rather than weaknesses, students and teachers negotiate a curriculum that invites the practice of broad-based skills for many purposes.

A key difference between the student-centered approach and the functional context approach can be summed up by the question, "Who defines the functional context?" In other words, whose perspective is used in

defining what workers' needs are and how they can best be addressed? Many functional context programs are shaped by an initial needs assessment, which is done by educational consultants who are given little time to study the complexities of the workplace or develop trust with workers. Their conclusions are, therefore, inescapably molded by the perceptions of those they work with most closely, the employers. Employers tend to define the functional context as the jobs their employees are doing, so that they envision change on the level of individual workers and jobs. If, however, needs assessors were to define the functional context as the entire workplace, then they might be framing the question as, "How can this workplace be improved?" rather than, "How can this worker be improved?" The ethnographic/student-centered approach aims to look at the larger workplace picture and more actively solicit worker perspectives about where problems and solutions lie.

Critics of the functional context approach have also turned to the ethnographic research on workers and workplaces to challenge its focus on worker deficiencies. Research shows that workers often possess more skills than they are willing and/or able to demonstrate, and that many skills that they do utilize go unrecognized by employers (Darrah, 1992; Darrah, 1990; Hull, 1991; Gowan, 1991). Skills may go unnoticed because workers, over time, specialize in certain areas and informally divide up tasks among themselves. Though each may have the knowledge needed to perform the entire job, they may have few opportunities to demonstrate that ability. Sometimes specialization (or seniority) brings workers special status that others are reluctant to challenge by showing that they, too, are skilled in a certain area. In addition, individuals develop their own strategies for approaching tasks. Their methods may not be recognized by managers as being equally effective ways of accomplishing their tasks. In short, workplace ethnographies challenge the narrow conclusions of work and literacy audits which suggest that productivity is declining because workers lack sufficient knowledge, when in fact there are workplace constraints that are preventing workers from utilizing and expanding the skills and knowledge they already have.

Ethnography has informed curriculum development by reminding us that the worker perspective is central to understanding what is happening in a workplace, identifying what workers do and do not know, and defining

what workers need. Teachers have used this approach to build a student-centered curriculum - one that is based on the knowledge and experience of the students/workers themselves. This model moves away from the use of prescriptive, pre-determined, skills-based goals to shape the curriculum, and toward a process that draws upon the thoughts and voices of workers as the starting point for all other learning. Using this process, it is impossible to create a single curriculum that can be replicated in each workplace education class. Each group will bring its own set of experiences and questions and will negotiate a curriculum tailored to its needs. This calls upon a different set of abilities from the teacher - facilitation skills, knowledge of resources and the ability to create teaching materials, flexibility, willingness to listen and learn, and the ability to create a learning environment that is responsive to students.

The Participatory Approach

The participatory approach shares a focus on contextualized learning based in student/worker experience and thought. It is very similar to the student-centered approach in terms of negotiating course content with students and focusing on their own purposes for learning. It differs, though, in its emphasis on worker/student empowement through discussion, analysis, and action about shared concerns. While the ethnographic approach invites workers to give voice to their views, the participatory approach differs in the following ways. First, in addition to problem-solving about individual situations, participatory education prompts students to examine the meaning of their collective experiences as a whole. What does it mean that everyone in an ESL class, for example, has a story about feeling uncomfortable using his/her native language at work? What patterns do they see in their experiences and how do they explain them? And, as importantly, how can they respond? This aspect of action - using old and newly developing skills as tools to change the conditions of our daily lives - is unique to the participatory approach. While the actions may be, or seem, small (a group request to see the company policy on language use, a letter to the company newsletter, etc.), they can represent a great transformation in the way workers view themselves and the role education can play in their lives.

Second, this approach asks students to question assumptions about work and the world. Where the ethnographic approach focuses on the value of sharing and validating worker voices, the participatory approach suggests that we all (students and teachers alike) look critically at where our ideas come from, the social forces that shape them, and their consequences. The point is to go beyond celebrating our voices uncritically and to use the classroom as a forum to compare what we believe to be true with what we actually live and see.

This approach to curriculum development involves students in setting course goals, identifying important themes for study, creating materials, and evaluating progress. "Conflicting agendas" are explored openly for effective solutions. As they are often at the root of worker concerns, they are dealt with in discussion rather than avoided. Through a theme-based curriculum, students work toward many of the goals shared by other approaches - an increased ability to: read and write, think critically, problem-solve, articulate needs, etc.

To illustrate some of the distinctions among the three approaches, we can consider how they might each deal with the worker need to learn English to improve his/her worklife. The functional context curriculum would be determined by a needs assessment of the kinds of English needed in a particular workplace. Lessons would be a series of prepared situations that call upon the worker students to use the language appropriate to that situation, perhaps including variations that students offer based on their own experiences. The ethnographic approach would start by asking the workers about when they need to use English, and would develop a communal pool of knowledge about when English is needed, when it can be substituted by other means of communication, etc. The teacher would use that initial discussion or writing to identify workers' language needs and then prepare follow-up lessons to address them. The participatory approach would also start with student discussion and follow up with responsive lessons, but discussion would include the questioning of the initial premise - that English improves peoples' worklives. Is this a truth workers and educators can take for granted? Are there people who speak English and still have entry-level, unfulfilling jobs? Who? Why is that? In this way, this approach encourages students to think critically about the messages they have been given about themselves, their role in the world of work, and the routes to better jobs and

lives. While some teachers find this to be discouraging, others believe that to explore the complex and difficult reality of work relieves workers of feeling that they are personally responsible for their low status and career stagnation. In this case, it would also raise the unfortunate but real issue of racism/ discrimination and offer workers the opportunity to more fully explore the relationship between language and power in the workplace.

It is clear from this comparison that curriculum models are not items that are easily interchangeable. Each one reflects an educational framework that shapes the roles of teachers, students, and funders; the course content; and the learning process. When we separate "curriculum" from the larger framework that gives it its logic, we can easily send students inconsistent messages about what and how we believe they can learn best. The models described above differ in purpose and, therefore, in implementation. The clearer we are about our own vision of workplace education and its role in workers' lives, the more honestly we can avoid hidden agendas and negotatiate a workable model for our classrooms.

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